



Pentecost 24A (P27)

November 8, 2026

[RCL] Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; **Matthew 25:1-13**

Opening Prayer |

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Context |

In Matthew 24 Jesus tells the disciples that one day the Temple will be destroyed, and so they ask him, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

Some questions are too big for a simple answer. In the New Testament, when someone asks Jesus a question, rarely does he answer plainly. Sometimes he responds with another question, but other times he responds with a story. The Gospel in Matthew 25:1-13 is one of these stories, called a parable.

Parables are like a lens through which to see the complexity of a question. Often multiple parables are told in a row, in order to demonstrate the plurality of possible lenses. They can sometimes seem like a straightforward allegory, but often contain troubling features, or pieces that don’t seem to make sense. These troubling places are an invitation to look deeper. Sometimes after telling the parable Jesus himself will suggest an interpretation, and sometimes he does not.

Early Christian communities would have shared the same question as the disciples: When will Jesus return? And what will the end of things be like? The parable of the ten bridesmaids is a difficult response to this undoubtedly difficult question. The other parables in this series—such as the parable of the talents and the parable of the unfaithful slave—are concerned with how the characters live while the master is away, whether they have been merciful or wise. This story, however, uses the image of a wedding to play out its narrative. In Galilee, weddings were celebrations of joy and feasting, open to the whole community. Wedding processions, as depicted in this story, were an ancient custom in which the bride and her bridesmaids waited for the bridegroom to arrive at her home, to bring her to his home where the wedding feast would be held.

Theological Reflection |

This parable opens (v. 1) with a description of the cast of characters. We have the ten young

women, the bridesmaids, and we have the bridegroom. Conspicuously missing is the bride. The literature of the Old Testament often refers to the people of Israel as the bride of the Lord, as in the prophet Hosea. Early church writers also understood the church to be the bride of Christ, looking to books like the Song of Solomon as an allegory for the relationship between God and the church. So in the midst of this wedding imagery, the reader is left to wonder, where is the bride?

The bridesmaids have both the foolish and the wise amidst their number, but all are waiting for the bridegroom to arrive (v. 2-4). In ancient wedding custom, the bridesmaids would have likely been friends of the bride, keeping watch for the return of her spouse-to-be. This was an occasion of joy and longing, waiting for the anticipated moment when the bridegroom would finally arrive.

All the young women alike, both foolish and wise, fall asleep while waiting because the bridegroom was delayed (v. 5). This delay is often associated with the delay of Christ's return. Early followers of Jesus would have both longed for the day when Christ would return in glory and expected its nearness. But in this waiting, rest is not forbidden. There is nothing foolish about falling asleep, and it is not presented here as a mistake.

Finally, the moment of excitement arrives, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him' (v. 6). But this is where the trouble starts. Some of the bridesmaids are prepared with extra oil for their lamps, but the others' lamps, which have been burning as they waited, are beginning to go out. The ones without enough oil ask for help, but there is not enough to share (v. 7-9).

This tension builds as the bridegroom arrives, and the wise bridesmaids make their way to the wedding. The foolish instead go in search of oil. When they finally arrive at the wedding banquet, the doors are shut (v. 10). In the tragic resolution to the bridesmaids' journey, the bridegroom says, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you" (v. 12). But this is not the end of the parable. The closing line, delivered to the hearer states, "Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (v. 13).

Here is a sign that something mysterious is afoot: "Keep awake." This admonition is offered at the end of the story. But none of the bridesmaids in the story kept awake, and yet the lucky still made it to the wedding banquet. In v. 12 it seems that the foolish bridesmaids are being punished for not being prepared—for failing to keep enough oil when they should have known better—however the warning tells the listener that they will know neither the day nor the hour. It is impossible to know when the bridegroom is coming. What then does it mean to be prepared for something that is unknowable? Did the "wise" bridesmaids just get lucky?

This parable can be difficult for us to read, because its outcomes seem to be so unfair, so harsh. And yet perhaps the bridesmaids are a distraction from the bride. Neither the foolish nor the wise bridesmaids showed any concern for the bride, whom they are meant to attend to and guide. What does her absence suggest about the unfolding of the feast?

By the time the final lines narrate the wedding feast the bridegroom and the bride evidently have been married at last. Nothing can stop the joyous union from taking place.

The bridegroom's words offered in v. 12 provide a hint about our role in the proceedings: To prepare for the wedding is to know the bridegroom, and to be ready for him coming leads to being present for the joy of his great feast.

Discussion Questions |

- Which character in this parable do you identify with? Why is that?
- What does it mean to prepare for Christ's return?
- Do you feel challenged by this parable? If so, why? If not, why? How do you deal with difficult or uncomfortable passages of scripture?
- What practices help you to seek Christ's presence every day? What keeps you alert to his appearance among us?

Faith in Practice |

Take time this week to read the whole passage in which this parable is situated (Matthew 24-25), using *lectio divina* or your preferred way of praying with scripture. Think about the assumptions you may have about Christ's return and invite the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind. Meditate on how you are 'keeping awake' in this time as we wait for the coming of Christ. What preparations are you making for him and for the feast to come?

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